

Academic Engagement in the Library Commons

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Abstract

While library commons are designed to increase student use and investment in the library for learning, many of them do little to involve faculty in their operations. Because learning is a cooperative enterprise between faculty and students, a more successful commons might explore opportunities to engage faculty and students in their scholarly and educational work. One strategy for doing this is to work with them to develop events and exhibits that build on the unique environment, tools, and resources of a library commons.

Introduction

Much has been written about library commons in recent years. For the most part, that literature has dealt with designing information and learning commons that support student learning by giving them the tools and resources they need for their academic work.¹ However, few authors have discussed how a library commons might facilitate collaboration and communication between faculty and students. To lay the groundwork for that discussion, this paper explores why a library commons successfully engages students but not faculty, describes one strategy that a commons might use to involve faculty in its operation, and outlines the potential benefits of involving faculty in a commons.

Strategies for Engagement

A library commons successfully engages undergraduates by employing two strategies. First, it gives undergraduates the tools and resources they need for their academic work. To complete that work, students require access to the internet, digital productivity tools, online information sources, library databases, and library catalogs. As a public space devoted to

¹ For a review of some of the recent information and learning commons literature, see Keating's "Putting Learning into the Learning Commons: A Literature Review" (2005).

computer use and information access, a commons provides these things to students who may not otherwise have ready access to them. Second, a commons employs design techniques that appeal to today's students. Designed to facilitate academic socializing and learning, it incorporates coffee shops, group workspaces, and presentation and display areas. Thus, a commons meets the collaborative work styles of millennial students by giving them a place to engage in self-directed learning and greater ownership of the library.²

Unfortunately, the strategies that engage undergraduates in a library commons do not appeal to faculty. Because faculty have more specialized research and computing needs than undergraduates do, it is often inefficient, if not impossible, for a commons to acquire the tools and software necessary to meet many of those needs. In addition, faculty already have departmental labs, meeting rooms, and offices on campus dedicated to their research and computing needs. Thus setting aside another collaborative space in the library would seem redundant to them. Finally, design techniques that appeal to the collaborative work styles of millennial students rarely appeal to faculty. At their worst, these techniques make faculty feel unwelcome in a commons, if not unwelcome in a library as a whole.³

Because learning is a cooperative enterprise between faculty and students, finding ways to increase collaboration and communication among faculty and students is important. One way to do that is to bring the scholarly and educational activities of faculty into spaces that students already inhabit. One strategy for bringing faculty into a commons is to use its unique tools and resources to collaborate with faculty to develop events and exhibits related to their scholarly and

² In addition to Robert Beagle's *The Information Commons Handbook* (2006), some recent works that recount, reflect on, and give advice about designing commons that fit student academic needs include Fox and Stuart's "Creating Learning Spaces Through Collaboration" (2009), Somerville's "Collaborative Design" (2008), Sinclair's "Commons 2.0" (2007), Oblinger's *Learning Spaces* (2006), MacWhinnie's "The Information Commons" (2003), and Beagle's "Conceptualizing an Information Commons" (1999).

³ In fact, even some librarians have expressed discomfort with recent trends in library design (Gayton, 2008).

educational work. Although examples of such work have been published elsewhere (Bodnar, 2009), how to initiate that work and how it benefits faculty, students, and the library remain relatively unexplored.

Working with Faculty and Students to Develop Events and Exhibits

Working with faculty and students to develop events and exhibits for a commons begins with a deep understanding of the character of a commons. Developing that understanding is more than a quantitative process; it requires a thorough observation and questioning of how patrons use the different areas and resources of a commons. Where do patrons socialize comfortably? Where do they work quietly? When do they work individually? When do they work collaboratively? Where do they feel free to arrange the furniture themselves, and where do they let the library control the space? Ultimately, the daily activities of a commons should suggest the parameters of its own investigation.

Understanding the character of a commons facilitates exploring how a commons can accommodate different types of events and exhibits. This exploration involves setting aside concerns about the potential content of events and exhibits and brainstorming how faculty might use various presentation styles to exploit the resources, layout, and flow of a commons. For example, identifying that an area in a commons is ideal for a poster session does not necessarily require knowledge of the subject matter of the posters. Just as the layout of a classroom can be adapted to different learning styles, different areas of a commons can be adapted to different event and exhibit styles.

Working with faculty and students to develop events and exhibits for a commons also requires connecting with faculty who are working on compelling and adaptable scholarship. This requires talking to as many faculty members as possible and seizing every opportunity to

explore their work. It also requires enlisting the help of others. Subject librarians, department liaisons, student advisors, and student leaders who frequently communicate with faculty and students and who understand the benefits of an active commons are helpful for connecting with faculty.

Successful events and exhibits highlight the scholarly work of faculty and students while drawing inspiration from the unique character of a commons. Although beginning such events and exhibits is difficult, each one helps build momentum for the next as faculty and students accept them as part of the experience of a commons and are themselves inspired to contribute to that experience. Imagine a series of student posters that summarizes work done in a senior seminar. Aimed to present student scholarship in an accessible and appealing way, the posters could draw inspiration from a commons by building on its distinctive brand or aesthetic. Alternatively, imagine a series of short presentations by faculty or students united by a common research theme or important social issue. These presentations could draw inspiration from a commons by exploiting its one-of-a-kind resources, distinctive character, and relationships with different library users.

Benefitting Faculty, Students, and the Library

How do events and exhibits hosted in a library commons benefit faculty? They communicate faculty research and teaching interests to those who visit the commons. This helps faculty identify and connect with interested people and potential collaborators. Events and exhibits also give new and untenured faculty additional chances to present and receive feedback on their work, and they help faculty in less-established research fields reach a new or wider audience. Finally, events and exhibits related to faculty teaching help generate student interest in specific courses and help fill seats in those courses.

Events and exhibits that present student academic achievements give students a chance to experience personal and community pride in a library when they see their work and the work of their peers in the commons. They also give students a chance to learn about research across disciplines by exposing them to educational opportunities they may not have otherwise considered. In addition, such events and exhibits help students discover new modes of communication by presenting different learning and research styles. Finally, the students who contribute to these events and exhibits have a safe place outside of their classrooms to present their work and build their resumes.

The library benefits from these faculty and student collaborations by hosting the events and exhibits that are created and from engaging in the collaborations themselves. First, hosting the events and exhibits make the library a more active and stimulating environment. Once faculty and students recognize that events and exhibits are part of a library commons experience, they will visit the library when they want to know what is happening in classrooms and in research across campus. The library can also build its collection by digitally capturing or otherwise recording elements of the events and exhibits it hosts. When archived or cataloged, these elements can provide the basis for unique library collections that reflect the culture and scholarship of the school. Second, by collaborating with the faculty and students, the library increases its involvement in their scholarly and educational work. Not only does this help a library understand the research and information needs of faculty and students, but those collaborators better understand the library's importance and have a greater stake in its continued success.

Conclusion

A library commons can aspire to be more than just a place in which learning is intended to happen (Bennett, 2008, p. 184). Learning is a social process that requires that faculty and students work together to achieve specific ends. By finding opportunities to be involved in that process and to increase communication between faculty and students, a library can more actively involve itself in the learning culture of a college or university. One opportunity for doing this is to work with faculty and students to develop events and exhibits related to their scholarly and educational work. Nevertheless, developing such events and exhibits is only one strategy for a more successful commons and a more successful library. Ultimately, a library must explore various strategies and commit to those that work best for its institution while continuing to learn and grow along with faculty and students.

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